**CHANGE COMMUNICATION GUIDE**

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| 28.03.2023 | DRAFT V0.1  Copied over what was in google docs  Updated the communication aims section, little tweaks in other sections  For stakeholder comms objective – added Know, Feel, Do |
| 15.04.2023 | DRAFT V0.2  Added sections for Messaging, Methods  Added sections for Risks and Measurement  Moved over the Intro points from the original outline document  Sent for review |
| 12.10.2023 | V1.0  Reviewers feedback has been incorporated.  Added Introduction, Appendix, References and Author profiles |

**Introduction**

Organisations are in a constant state of movement. Almost anything about them can change – leaders, owners, structures, values, products, strategies, priorities and much more. But for organisations to successfully, good internal communication is a must.

The evidence is clear on this point. Communication has been identified as ‘the means by which change happens’ (Ford and Ford, 1995; Lewis, 2011). Change failure due to poor communication is indicated by scholars like Elving (2005) and Rafferty et al (2013). Vital links between effective communication and change acceptance have been shown (Endrejat, 2020; Stouten, Rousseau & Cremer, 2018). If you are involved in change or internal communication, links between the two will already be apparent no doubt.

Communicating change effectively is a huge challenge though, involving elements that are typically outside the direct management of internal communication teams – leadership, management, and project management for example. For those involved in managing communication, influencing others is at least as important as the work they themselves produce. Good communication can pull the various parts of the organisation involved in designing and delivering change together to improve cohesion and alignment. It can help to surface issues and resolve differences. It can help everyone to understand what is expected of them.

It is also highly contextual. An approach that works in one organisation for one change may not work in another. Understanding and judging the situation is vital. That said, there are some general principles and approaches that are known to improve your chances of success. This guide covers the essentials of communicating change, strategically and effectively, in organisations. It is aimed at internal communication professionals, change management professionals and others involved in enabling change.

**1. Understanding the change context**

Communication plays a vital role in change – it can influence attitudes, ensure vital information is shared in all directions, and drive action, among other things. It is very rarely the whole picture though – change can have many other aspects including strategic, technological, structural, regulatory and managerial ones. It is best if communication and these other elements are planned together whenever possible – so that communication is an integrated part of plans to make the change. Therefore anyone planning change communication must work closely with those attempting to direct the change. Among the things you’ll need to understand from them are the ‘why’ behind the change, and the ‘nature’ of the desired change.

**The ‘why’**

To communicate change, you need to understand the reasons for it; the ‘why’ that is driving the change. Helping people understand how change links to the bigger picture and strategic organisational goals is a critical aspect of change communication.

There can be many reasons for change:

* External drivers like new regulatory requirements, industry disruption, emerging technology trends, world events like the pandemic, or supply chain disruptions due to geopolitical situations
* Internal drivers for change like restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, new ways of working, introduction of new products and services, or new leadership.

Many changes will be driven by a combination of internal and external factors.

([A PESTLE analysis](https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/pestle-analysis-factsheet/) can be a useful tool to identify key external factors (Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental) that influence an organisation.)

Understanding the ‘why’ is important. To successfully communicate change, you’ll also need to consider your organisation’s recent history, structure and culture. Collectively, we refer to these things as ‘organisational context’.

**The nature of change**

Before determining how to approach communication of change, you’ll need to identify the nature of the change you are looking at.

* Does the change affect the **whole** organisation or only **part** of it?
* Are those affected in **similar** or **different** ways?
* Do they need to do anything differently as a result of the change? Or to drive the change? What level of change is required (e.g. **compliance** or a **deeper level shift** in behaviours and mindsets)?
* Is the change a **radical break** from the current state, or an **evolution** of it?
* Is the change in pursuit of a **broad range** of organisational goals, or a **narrow range**?
* Are the specifics of the change (in terms of what actions must be taken) **defined top-down**, or to be **defined locally**?
* Is the change **time-limited** or **ongoing**?
* Is it **clearly defined** or have a high-degree of **uncertainty**?

With any of these things, the answers may not be binary. For instance, a change may have a significant effect on one part of the organisation, and more limited impact elsewhere.

The nature of change will inform what the organisation needs from its people. For example if there is a regulatory change that is time critical and needs to be adopted very quickly, the aim is to achieve compliance. On the other hand, successfully implementing a new organisational structure and ways of working may require a deeper level of change, involving a shift in attitudes and culture over an extended period of time. New safety regulations may start with compliance and adherence to safety rules initially, and then work towards embedding a safety conscious culture over time.

**2. The change journey**

Different approaches to delivering change can apply in different situations. Change communication needs to take this into account as well as the organisational context and the nature of the change.

**Planned and emergent change**

Change management literature predominantly mentions two main change approaches: planned and emergent. These are related to some of the characteristics described under ‘the nature of the change’ in section 1.

A planned approach assumes a more stable environment, with clearly defined outcomes, moving steadily from the current position to the future desired position in a controlled way. This tends to also rely on a more top-down approach.

An emergent approach considers organisations as complex systems, with greater uncertainty, continually adapting in response to a constantly changing environment. This approach tends to be more open-ended and evolves iteratively. It does not rely on a detailed and predefined ‘end state’, although the general direction of travel is known. Greater uncertainty and unpredictability are inherent with emergent change. This approach also allows for a more bottom-up approach.

Typically there will be a mix of change approaches being used across organisations. A change initiative will typically exist of multiple streams and each may well have a different delivery approach. Regardless of which change approach is being used, the important thing for anyone managing change communication is to consider the phases of the change journey and where people may be along this journey, to ensure change communication is aligned accordingly.

**The phases of the change journey**

Change can be an emotional roller coaster and cause anxiety and upheaval. People will have different needs depending on where they are along the ‘change journey’ and the potential impact of change on them. It can be helpful to consider change in three broad phases:

**Getting ready for change**

In this early phase, the focus is on helping people to become aware of the change, to understand why change is happening, how it links to wider organisational goals and purpose, what it is about, and start to make sense of how it potentially impacts them and what it requires of them.

The aim of communication and engagement in this phase might be to help people prepare for and get ready for the journey ahead and gain valuable feedback and input from people impacted by the change.

**Making change happen**

For people to become ready and willing to engage in change, they need a safe environment where they feel comfortable to express their views, challenge and offer ideas. As they start to take steps towards implementing change, they need to be able to experiment and try things out without fear of consequences, should their initial attempts not work.

The aim of communication in this phase might be to help build motivation and maintain momentum, to highlight progress, to keep reminding people of why the change is so important and make visible how challenges are being overcome.

**Sustaining change**

It takes time for change to become ‘this is the way we do things around here’. Sustained effort is required to support people in adopting change and to keep them motivated to ensure a change becomes embedded into business-as-usual operations.

The aim of communication through this phase may be to highlight successes, reinforce key change related messages and demonstrate the benefits gained from achieving this change.

**The reality of change**

These are general principles. The reality is that change can be messy. The phases described above do not happen in a neat, linear way. There will be inevitable overlaps. Sometimes the situation means there is little opportunity to get people ready – for instance, where there are regulatory restrictions on what you can say, in the case of an acquisition for example. In these situations, it is likely more effort will be required to help sustain the change. Also, multiple changes are usually ongoing at any time, driven by a mix of planned and emergent approaches. So people can experience being in different phases for the various changes impacting them. Nevertheless, the phases described above are a good guide for what communication can focus on during change.

**3. Setting change communication objectives**

You can’t communicate effectively unless you know why you are communicating. Based on the considerations in section 1 (the ‘why’, the organisational context and the nature of the change), you should be able to determine what specific role or roles communication can play in helping to successfully enable change and its benefits for the organisation.

The role of communication in change tends to fall into these broad categories:

* Involvement – we communicate with people because we want them to help us shape the change.
* Driving action - we communicate because we want people to take an action or behave in a certain way that contributes to the change.
* Mitigating risk - we communicate because we hope to limit resistance, maintain employee commitment or resolve internal conflict.
* Compliance - we communicate because we are legally obliged to (e.g. to comply with collective consultation legislation).

Understanding the role of communication in delivering the change will help you to define change communication objectives. It can also be helpful to think about:

* what the change requires of people – this is likely to be different for different groups (see ‘Who to communicate with section’ below
* the gap between where people are right now and where they need to be ( map the ‘as is’ and ‘to be’)
* how and where communication can be an effective means of closing that gap.

Objectives may evolve over time as people progress through the change journey. You may need a number of them (depending on the level of complexity facing you). And you may set them at both broad and specific levels (e.g. specific objectives may be set for different areas of your organisation).

Each objective should be a clear statement describing what you want the communication to achieve.

Change communication objectives can be considered in terms of:

* What do you want people to KNOW
* What do you want people to FEEL
* What do you want people to DO

(See the IoIC guide to IC strategy for more detailed advice on this)

**Setting clear expectations and boundaries**

Change is often most successfully delivered when employees have some degree of agency over it. This might be that the organisation sets a broad ambition (‘become more efficient’) and people can identify ways of meeting that objective. It could be that they are given clearer limits to work within (‘reduce the number of supplier contracts’). In these cases, an important role for change communication is setting the boundaries of what people can and cannot influence and communicating this clearly. It is also important to provide the information that may help people to engage meaningfully with these objectives (for example, this may involve setting clear targets or benchmarking against competitors).

If all of the decisions are being taken at the top (‘all purchasing decisions for buying to go through a new centralised procurement function’), the role of communication may simply be to ensure instructions are successfully delivered to people. Even in these cases, there is value in ensuring that feedback from those affected by the change is heard by those designing it.

**Ensuring links to broader organisational goals**

Alongside this, there is likely to be a general need to ensure that information about the change is available to the right people, and that the change is linked to the broader purpose, strategy and values of the organisation. This will be linked to an organisation’s broader goals for engaging and aligning its people.

The key here is to be clear on what you are trying to achieve with your change communication throughout, and to recognise that this may be different for different groups (when they are impacted differently), and at different times.

**4. Understanding the people you are communicating with**

You can only effectively communicate change if you understand who you are communicating with and how these people may potentially respond.

The first step is to identify who to communicate with. It is usually a good idea to divide people into groups based on:

* Who will be impacted by this change and how?
* Who can influence the change and how?

You may also need to approach communication with some groups differently for practical reasons, for example:

* Different departments across the organisation
* Different geographical locations and countries
* Whether they are employees or volunteers or contractors

Grouping people into different segments means different communication needs and objectives can be met through different communication approaches. For instance, with groups who have greater influence over the successful delivery of the change or for those impacted by change more deeply, you can plan a higher level of involvement or co-creation. You will clearly want to invest more time in the groups that are most impacted by or influential over the change.

Having identified the groups you need to communicate with, think about each group’s possible response to change and the level of any potential resistance to change. This can vary a great deal and depends on factors such as:

* Where they are on the change journey
* How the change is likely to impact them (it could be negatively or it may benefit them – more likely it will be a mix of the two)
* The scale of that change
* What their experience of change has been in the past
* Their natural preference and attitude to change.

Having considered all of this, specific communication objectives for each group can be identified (see section 3).

In analysing groups this way, you can consider where you need to move beyond simply sharing information, and identify specifically who needs to be involved in change processes and what behaviour changes are required. For example, when introducing new organisational values, you want people to know what they are – and also want them to behave in a way that is consistent with the values.

**5. Deciding what to say**

Whatever role communication is playing in delivering your change (see section 3), at some point you will be faced with decisions about what to say. Your messages may vary based on where you are in the change journey (see section 2) and the group of employees you are addressing (see section 4). But there is also a need for some consistency. People are more likely to remember messages that are simple and are repeated frequently. So prioritise the main things you want to say and encapsulate these in some 'key messages' to be used throughout the change. Make sure these are aligned with your communication objectives.

Things you should consider covering in your messaging include the following:

* What the change is (in as clear terms as possible)
* Why the change is necessary or beneficial for the organisation
* What the benefits of this change will be
* How the change will affect those you are addressing
* What you require from people in order to make the change happen. This may be directive - as in an instruction. Or it may be an invitation for people to think about how they can contribute or to contribute in specific ways. In the latter case, the parameters must be clear, particularly about what is already decided, and where input or creativity are welcome
* How and when the change will be delivered.

If some details are not known, it is best to be open about this. But you usually can describe the process through which these details will be worked out. Giving people a clear sense of the course of events to follow is almost always helpful. This can include making commitments about when and how you will communicate updates.

In developing messaging, you should also consider people's likely emotional response to what you say and make sure your language is attuned to this. For example, if people may feel threatened then very upbeat, energetic language is likely to seem out of touch. It generally makes sense to focus on positives, but if you ignore the risks or drawbacks then messages may lack credibility. Finding an appropriate balance makes sense.

Using simple language, freed as much as possible from jargon, technical terminology and acronyms makes it easier for everyone to understand what is being said. It also forces the communicator to be clearer, where more complex language might be used to conceal lack of clarity. Using some of the principles of story-telling might help you to develop more persuasive and memorable messages.

Where possible, messages should be tested with the intended audience to evaluate the likely response and find ways of improving them prior to wider use. Networks like ‘change champions’ can be helpful for this purpose.

**6. Deciding how to communicate**

At points during the change, you will need to decide on the exact communication activities to be delivered. These may be set out in a grid showing the timing of each activity, its nature (channel, people, purpose), and who is responsible for it.

In choosing the communication methods to be used, there are a number of things to consider.

* Some activities allow for interaction between people, some do not. Where the potential for misunderstanding or conflict is greater, methods that allow for interaction are best
* At times, you will want to make sure that everyone is sent a message at the same time, making methods like email more attractive. In these cases, consider whether people will have questions or feedback and, if so, ensure the message is followed swiftly by opportunities for these to be shared
* Leaders have a key role in communication. They must appear confident in the direction chosen, consistent with each other, but also demonstrate willingness to listen to and engage with those affected. Think carefully about which communications should be led by them
* Managers are often the most trusted source of information for employees. They have an important role in helping their people understand what changes mean for, and require from, their specific unit. They should be supported in this role. Team conversations about changes are often the most crucial communication activities in the delivery of a change, so consider them within your plan
* With both leaders and managers, if you attempting to encourage certain behaviours then they must role model these with conviction
* Events (online or in-person) have the potential to bring larger numbers of employees together and can be important moments in the delivery of a change. They are usually high-cost though (particularly considering all the time involved for those who attend), so make sure they are used at the points when they will deliver the highest impact.
* Feedback channels should be in place throughout a change, and these can be routes through managers or make use of technology like internal social media or ‘always on’ employee surveys. Make sure feedback is regularly checked and that answers to common questions are published in a timely way
* ‘Push’ channels (where the message is sent to people) like email are good for providing important updates that everyone should be aware of. ‘Pull’ channels (where people find the message themselves) like intranets are good for making more detailed information available for those who want to find out more.
* Consider the accessibility of your communications and any reasonable adjustments that may be required by those you’re are communicating with.

Ultimately, you need to find the right set of methods to achieve the specific change communication objectives you have set in the specific context of your organisation.

**7. Managing risks**

Risk can be defined as: ‘An uncertain event or set of events that, should it occur, will have an effect on the achievement of objectives’.

Any work that is undertaken has an element of uncertainty or risk. So proactively identifying potential risks and putting measures in place to manage those risks is important to increase the chances of success.

This is something that we do regularly in our daily lives, for example, if going out we may decide to take an umbrella or a raincoat just in case it rains. The ‘just in case’ is a way of managing the risk that it might rain. We assess the likelihood of it raining and consider the impact that would have on us, in order to decide whether to take the umbrella or not.

Effective risk management includes steps to identify, assess and manage risks. This needs to be done all the way through an initiative.

**Identify risks**

Risks can be described using this structure: cause, event, effect.

Risk cause: What is the potential cause of the risk; the reason behind it?

*e.g. Line managers may have mixed feelings themselves about this change*

Risk event: What could happen as a result?

*e.g. so they may give insufficient time for team briefings about this change*

Risk effect: How will this impact on your objective?

*e.g. resulting in lack of buy-in and poor motivation to engage in this change.*

The risk can be written in one sentence.

A good place to start with identifying risks is to consider what assumptions are being made. For example it may be assumed that line managers will embrace the change themselves, or that they are comfortable holding team briefings about this change with their teams.

Lessons learned from other change initiatives are also a very helpful source for identifying potential risks and may help to shape the approach this time around.

Also, be aware that optimism bias may be at play, so be intentional about thinking objectively and identifying things that could potentially go wrong or get in the way of progress.

**Assess risks**

To assess the risk, consider how likely it is to happen and if it does, what is the potential impact. To help identify the potential impact, you could consider impact to things such as time, costs, and reputation.

It is also worth taking into account proximity – how quickly the risk could materialise, is it imminent, in which case it becomes more important to address it, or is it further out, in which case you may choose to not take action just yet.

The likelihood of line managers giving insufficient time for team briefings, could be high. The impact could be high too, in that lack of buy-in and poor motivation to make this change, means that a key objective of this change communication strategy is not achieved in the timescales required.

**Manage risks**

Having identified and assessed risks, you need to decide which risks to do something about, and what to do about them.

If in the above example the likelihood was low and impact was low, you could choose to do nothing for now, but keep an eye on the situation. However, where there is more likelihood and potentially higher impact, you need to consider what to put in place to manage that risk. These actions can be aimed at reducing the likelihood and, or reducing the impact of the risk.

For example, since line managers can be personally impacted by change too, additional actions to provide early support, more two-way dialogue opportunities to help them make sense of the change and consider what it means for them, and coaching support for holding team briefings with their teams, can all help reduce the likelihood of that risk happening.

Or you may decide that the likelihood is low, in which case there may be no point in taking additional measures just yet. But if the risk increased or if the problem occurred with one team, then a back-up plan could be put in place, to provide extra support for the manager and team.

Putting in place suitable risk management actions takes time and effort, so it is advisable to proactively plan for them.

**8. Measuring the effectiveness of your communication**

Effective measurement demonstrates what is working and where adjustments may be needed in order to successfully achieve the desired objectives. It enables effective use of resources and proves the value of the communication efforts set out in the strategy.

A critical component of effective measurement is having clear, specific objectives set out for the change communication (see section 3).

**Measures can be quantitative or qualitative**

Quantitative measures are related to numbers, such as what percentage of people have signed up for the newsletter, how many visitors have come to the site, how many clicks have we had on this link. These are outputs from the activity undertaken.

Qualitative measures are about meaning and understanding, such as what have people understood about this change, what meanings they make about it, how they feel about it, how ready do they feel to adopt the new processes, are they being advocates of the change. These are outcomes, resulting from the activity undertaken.

Alongside formal measurement, more informal listening (e.g. inviting feedback at team meetings) can provide helpful indications about how well the change communication is going.

**Measurement as change progresses**

What is measured will shift as people progress along the change journey.

For example, for a change about improving customer service, the change communication strategy may aim to move a group from awareness about the change, to understanding and getting involved, to becoming ready and able to adopt the changes, to doing something differently that leads to the desired results. Types of measures along the way, may be:

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| Change communication | Measures |
| Raise awareness about the change – run briefings and produce short videos to explain the change.  Raise understanding of the drivers for change, and what is going to happen when. | 10 briefings are run – with 60% of the group attending in total.  Five videos are produced over six months, which are viewed by 80% of the group.  Understanding of the drivers for change and what is going to happen, increases from 50% to 80% based on survey results. |
| Run a campaign to promote the training that is available for people to get trained in the new processes.  Forums with small numbers of people are run, and all managers hold change conversations with their teams, to understand how people feel about the change, and how ready they are to adopt the new processes. | 90% of the group book onto and attend the training sessions.  60% of people are feeling more positive about this change, compared to 10% at the start of the change initiative based on survey results. |
| Results from a pilot are communicated widely.  New processes are implemented in two phases. Plans and progress are communicated frequently.  Stories about people using the new processes are communicated. | Momentum starts to build, with more people talking positively about the changes based on feedback at team meetings.  The number of people using the new processes increases as the processes are implemented, observed by managers.  Negative comments about the new processes and initial teething problems decrease. Positive feedback about the new processes increases. Measured through team meeting feedback and short surveys. |
| Managers continue to hold regular briefings with their teams to ensure change is embedded.  More success stories are communicated widely.  Feedback from people is incorporated to refine the processes further.  Success stories continue to be communicated. | There is an initial productivity dip overall in the department. Within two months, response times to customer queries are improved. The number of queries resolved within 12 hours increases from 40% to 60%  People start to make suggestions for further improvements in the future.  Within six months, number of repeat customers increases. Sales increase by 20%. |

**Learn and adapt**

Your communication approach should not be set in stone. Measurement along the way, makes it possible to get early warning indicators if the proposed approach is working and if not, action can be taken to adapt the approach and ensure things are on track to successfully achieve the desired objectives.

What is learnt from measurement and listening during this change may also be used to inform future change initiatives in the organisation. In this way, the organisation becomes more capable of delivering change successfully and – ultimately – succeeding.

**Appendix**

**Change communication strategy planning checklist**

1. Understand the background
   * Identify where is change being initiated – which group of people have overall accountability for delivering this change
   * Identify which other departments or workstreams are involved in delivering this change – to understand key roles and responsibilities (and governance)
   * Clarify the drivers for change and consider the organisational context in which change is happening
   * Consider the nature of the change – (section 1) – the potential impact and extent of the impact
   * Consider the change approach and phases of the change journey (section 2)
2. Set objectives – identify what the communication needs to achieve
3. Identify groups to communicate with – and specific objectives for each
4. Identify what to say (messaging) – which may be broken down by stages of the change journey and groups you are communicating with
5. Identify how to communicate (methods) – which may be broken down by stages of the change journey and groups you are communicating with
6. Identify risks – and how these will be mitigated
7. Measure the effects of your change communication, adapting your approach if needed

Note that planning is iterative – you will often need to revisit elements of the plan as you capture learnings and the situation changes. A plan is very rarely ‘set in stone’.

Stages 4-6 in particular benefit from being considered simultaneously in a joined-up way (e.g. your analysis of risk may inform your messaging, and your messaging may inform your choice of method).

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**Author profiles**

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Oli splits his time between a senior management role at the CIPD, the professional body for HR and people development, and teaching internal communication as part of the IoIC and Solent University Masters in Internal Communication Management. He has formerly held roles in internal communication management for a range of organisations including the Civil Aviation Authority, Scope and Royal Mail, working on a number of complex transformation programmes in the process. He is the lead author of the IoIC Guide to Internal Communication Strategy, a Fellow of the IoIC and in 2022 received a Diploma of Honour from the European Association of Internal Communication (FEIEA).

**Ranjit Sidhu ChMC**

Ranjit works with clients to support them in overcoming the challenges of making change happen in their organisations. As a chartered management consultant and trainer, she advises on topics related to best practice change and project management approaches, as well as the communication and people aspects of managing business transformation.

She teaches the change management and stakeholder influencing units of the IOIC and Solent University Masters in Internal Communication Management. She is author of a number of publications and Founder of [ChangeQuest](http://www.changequest.co.uk), an accredited training organisation for certifications such as the Change Management Practitioner and Facilitation Skills.